

**OFFER'S DYKE**

The dyke burst at the Argos website recently, when more than 10,000 eager customers rushed to order a Bush 28" integrated digital TV and DVD player-recorder which normally sells at £349 but was on offer at the bargain price of 49p. The online price was a slip of the keystroke, of course, and Argos refused to honour any of the website purchases. Apart from many hours of wasted time and expense in refunds and consultations with lawyers, no real harm was done, but the incident highlights a remarkable phenomenon.

A few years ago, Argos was involved in a similar cock-up, offering Sony Nicam televisions for £2.99 instead of £299, but back then only a few online shoppers placed orders before the mistake was rectified. So how come so many punters flooded the site this time round? The answer lies in vast networks of canny consumers who share instant information about bargain deals. Zygote himself recently benefited from a return flight between London and Santiago for the same cost as a packet of Werther's Original toffees thanks to a tip-off from a fellow cheapskate traveller.

With browsers and email increasingly available on pocket devices, commercial websites cannot afford to let these errors through for a minute. A digit in the dyke will no longer hold back the flood of traffic that results from a misplaced decimal point.

SIGNING AWAY RESPONSIBILITY

The introduction of chip and PIN technology is costing the consumer a fortune as the massive overheads are passed down via increased processing charges. The whole deal was sold to us on the basis that chip

ZYGOTE

Before announcing the winner of the coveted Annual Gonzo Gizmo Award, Zygote has some distressing news for the marketing folks who think a sandwich can be used for cleaning toilets

and PIN is safer and more secure than looking at a pair of signatures and seeing if they match, but that is bunkum, balderdash and baloney. Zygote has always maintained that far from helping security, the new technology makes it easier for criminals to operate scams and accomplish identity theft, and now he has an ally in one of the country's leading criminologists.

Doctor Emily Finch interviewed a great many fraudsters and sent out a small army of stooges with chip and PIN cards that didn't belong to them, and she has now published data that backs Zygote's theory. It proves that workers in shops, post offices and garages become far less vigilant when responsibility for ID verification is handed over to computers.

It is incredibly easy to 'shoulder surf' someone at the checkout as they key in their PIN, and then steal their card as they fumble to pack their shopping. It is also surprisingly common for harassed folk simply to leave their card behind in the slot if they are distracted. Alternatively, the crooks pretend they have forgotten the PIN of a

stolen card and are often allowed to sign for the goods instead.

Such misuse is now hardly ever challenged, because the till operators have lost the habit of handling a consumer's card, let alone checking the ID. The blind faith that retailers, banks and government have put into electronic ID verification is not only misplaced, it's downright dangerous. And as for computerised ID cards, they will aggravate the instances of identity theft, not reduce them. My name is Clarke, Charles Clarke, and I claim my £30 ID tax from each and every one of you.

BANGING ON

When the maker of the household cleaning products Dettol and Harpic launched its Cillit Bang brand, its profits rose 15 per cent to a healthy £268 million. Apart from having a name like a Swedish porn film, Cillit Bang also exploits online viral marketing in the form of bogus postings to blog sites and message boards from a fictitious character named Barry Scott.

Zygote fully endorses the Cillit Bang claim, which according to its own website "is the best thing

since sliced bread" for cleaning your toilet. How true that is – a Hovis sandwich is rubbish for removing those stubborn stains around the lip of the u-bend. Anyway, the online community got all hot and bothered when they found they had been duped by the public relations agency responsible for the Cillit Bang fake emails and demanded apologies from the scum-busters.

Wise up, guys. If you don't know by now that the past 50 years of advertising for soap powder and bathroom cleansers is based on the most obvious pack of lies in the marketing world, you probably believe that all those postings on internet message boards are true.

A HOLE LOAD OF FUN

It's that time of year again when the Annual Gonzo Gizmo Award is announced, traditionally presented by Zygote during the festive season for services to involuntary urinary action via spontaneous laughter.

There is absolutely no contest for this year's winner of the AGGA, hereby awarded to NTT DoCoMo for its Yubi-Wa phone, which is worn like a ring on your finger. The Bluetooth-enabled device is about the same size, shape and colour as a ram's testicle, and uses a bone-conduction transceiver so you can operate your phone simply by sticking your finger into a suitable body cavity, such as your ear, your nose or presumably your arse. It gives a whole new meaning to the term ringtone, doesn't it?

And on that joyful note, Zygote would like to wish each and every one of you a prosperous and peaceful New Year. My sincere thanks as always for reading this, and remember, computers are a public convenience used in the privacy of your own home. ☺

Great Moments in Computing
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216: SYNTHETIC SPEECH



Early synthetic speech units relied on mechanical relays, and were vulnerable to local conditions.



For years it has been difficult to tell synthetic speech output from the real thing.



But since 1997, impatient consumers have been waiting for redundant units to be replaced with alternative models.